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ABSTRACT

Governments must change their entire perspective regarding social policy to keep abreast of the rapid changes occurring in society today. Major trends in social policy and the public sector fueling this call for change include the (1) shifting needs of social services; (2) inflexibility of current well-established but rigid institutions; (3) increasing domination of political processes by single-issue politics that promote the narrow views of powerful special interest groups; (4) declining faith of the population in governments' ability to solve major social problems; (5) increasing gap between expeditures and available revenue; and (6) growing interdependence in the policy system that is causing implementation difficulties. Adapting to these changes will require greater flexibility in the government's use of resources and a more integrated approach to policy development. Governments, however, generally are ill prepared to change; among the many barriers to change are the critical matters of status and pay that can serve to penalize managers who introduce measures that facilitate greater efficiency or that save resources. It is reasonable to assume, though, that given time, governments will be able to adjust to the changes surrounding them. (KM)

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GOVERNMENT PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING IN EDUCATION AND OTHER SOCIAL POLICY FIELDS

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Note: This paper is a revised version of a talk given for the Canadian Studies Programme of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, on January 8, 1987. The author wishes to thank the Canadian Studies Programme, and, in particular, Mr. D. Ben Natan, Prof. Arie Shachar, and Prof. Dan Inbar of the Hebrew University.

The reader who has managed to overcome the lethargy induced by so boring a title sufficiently to begin to read this paper should immediately be aware that the topic is not as bad as it sounds. Indeed, the issue raised is a most complex one, full of problems and paradoxes. While the view given here has largely been developed from experience inside the bureaucracy, it also contains a large amount of respect and sympathy for politicians, the fellow-travellers of bureaucrats in policy endeavours. One might wonder at this, since politicians are not held in the highest respect these days. For this observer, however, considerable contact with politicians has induced many positive feelings as well as the opposite.

One hears so often that we live in a period of rapid change that the statement has become a cliche. Nonetheless, there are at least some respects in which the statement is true. And one of these has to do with government's approach to social policy. The fact is that governments are now changing (though in a rather ad hoc manner) and will have to continue to change their entire way of thinking about social policy matters.

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In this paper I wish to address three aspects of this situation. First, the changes in context surrounding social policy in government are briefly traced. The impact of these changes on the practice of government is noted. And, finally, and with less temerity than is warranted, some possible prospects for government policy-making are delineated. While the author's experience, and many of the examples in this paper, are in the field of education, the comments are generally relevant to social policy broadly conceived.

The Context for Social Policy

Books could be, and have been written on the kinds of changes affecting industrialized societies. Indeed, this sort of analysis has become a small industry, in which people such as John Naisbitt have made considerable amounts of money (or so one presumes from sales of his books). Little of this analysis, however, has focussed specifically on the public sector and social policy. Six major trends are outlined below. While there is no claim that they are the only ones of importance, they are having a significant impact.

1. Changing needs for social services. There can be no doubt that the kinds of social services people want or need (no attempt to reconcile those terms will be made) are changing. To begin with, in social policy areas services breed new needs and demands. Thus we have the phenomenon of newly emerging client groups, who, but for the major expansion of services in past decades, would never have appeared at all. The learning disabled in the schools are a perfect example. Equally, the current concern in western democracies about adult literacy would not exist had not there been a massive increase in educational levels in these countries over the last thirty or forty years.

Of course, not all changes in service needs are self-induced. Changes in circumstance are also important. For example, changing demographics in Canada have moved attention from programs and services for youth to programs and services for the elderly, as the latter become a larger proportion of the population. Similarly, in the area of training, shifts in employment patterns and high levels of unemployment have created a concern for retraining rather than initial training of new workers.

Ideology also plays a role in shaping what are thought of as appropriate services at any given point in time. The whole concept of normalization, or mainstreaming, which has had an enormous impact on many areas of social service in the last decade or two, emerges not from any objective set of circumstances, but from changes in our beliefs about what is right. This does not, I hasten to add, make such a change any less legitimate or important; I would not want for a moment to suggest that what we believed to be right is somehow less important than some supposed set of "facts of the matter". The important point is to note that changes in service needs and demands are not simply a matter of conditions, but also of our beliefs about those conditions.

But whatever the cause, demands on social services are changing, in almost every area. Education faces pressures to do a better job in preparation for work, to train for entrepreneurship, to deal with emerging technologies, to produce better results for various disadvantaged groups, to extend accessibility to postsecondary education, and so on. Health services are under immense pressure to keep up with developments in technology, to deal with emerging health problems such as AIDS, and to do a better job on the preventive side. Social services are called on to provide more support to the elderly, to

do a better job with abused children, to respond to major changes in the structure and operation of families, and to serve effectively increasingly heterogeneous populations.

2. The institutions which provide the bulk of our social services are relatively inflexible. These very significant shifts in service demands must be faced by institutions which are generally so well-established as to be rather rigid. They are rigid not because the people in them wish to be so, but because the nature of institutions, as Veblen pointed out many years ago, is to move towards rigidity - what he called "ossification". The longer an institution exists, the more it is constrained by such things as operating procedures, collective agreements, and, even more powerfully in many cases, the collection of unwritten rules and expectations which has come to be called organizational culture. All of these act to make the organization, in many cases, more concerned with its internal operations than with the welfare of its clients. The ability to redeploy resources, including people, is one of the critical areas in which institutions normally become less flexible over time.

Institutions in the social services are also rendered less responsive by a phenomenon which has been termed the "logic of confidence" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The logic of confidence suggests that social services receive support not because they necessarily do anything about problems, but because they provide activities around the problem. For example, as long as health care institutions provide services which are related to illness, there will be little question as to whether these services are particularly effective either in preventing or alleviating illness. Similarly, as long as schools have courses, curriculum and the like, questions about the adequacy of outcomes are seldom raised.

Finally, one must note the phenomenon of goal displacement,

in which institutions substitute goals which can be achieved for goals which may be more important, but are difficult to achieve. If schools are not really able to ensure the development of reading skills, they can substitute the goal of failing students who do not learn to read, or, alternatively, take on the goal of passing all students, whether they can read or not. In either case the original goal has been replaced by one which can be met. Similarly, in health care one can substitute the goal of providing informational materials for the goal of educating people about health hazards.

I do not wish to be accused of excessive cynicism. Not all institutions are guilty of these tactics. Furthermore, most people working in our institutions intend and attempt to do a good job in meeting institutional goals as layed out. The fact is, though, that our major institutions do have great, and increasing, difficulty, in responding to rapid changes in context and in demands.

3. Changes in political processes are having a significant impact on governments. While it is dangerous to the point of being foolhardy to generalize about political phenomena across countries, in Canada we are witnessing a number of trends which may well be similar in other countries.

Perhaps most notably, political life is being dominated increasingly by single issue politics. By this I mean that more and more of political debate is organized by groups whose purpose is to achieve a particular policy outcome on a particular issues. These groups include existing bodies such as employer groups and unions, but also, and increasingly, groups organized specifically around particular issues. In education, for example, Canadian groups such as the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities and the Canadian Parents for French have had great impact on policies across the country.

Under these circumstances, politics is more and more a matter of satisfying particular interests, in the course of which broader, national concerns may well be ignored as having no body to argue for them.

A corollary to this trend is that political debate is sharper and more aggressive than used to be the case. Where narrower views are more often adopted, there is likely to be more stridency in the arguments. There would appear to be - and here I am being highly subjective and speculative - less and less reluctance in recent years to use political weapons, such as scandal-mongering, which were once quite uncommon. If I am correct in this view, and the tone of political debate is degenerating, the result will be increased cautiousness on the part of governments in order to avoid trouble, and increased sensitivity to the agendas of key interest groups on any given issue. Of course, these interest groups usually speak for the already-empowered. In the case of social services, this means service providers or advantaged service users are likely to have increasing influence, while clients' needs become less important.

A further political trend concerns the growing importance of the media. As polling becomes more and more prevalent, and as voters rely more and more on television, with its superficial approach and lack of followup, there is more emphasis on political style and less on substance. (Others argue, to be fair, that in fact mass access to political information, however limited, has actually enhanced democracy by removing control from elite groups.)

Finally, in Canada we are currently immensely aware of the potential influence of the courts on social policy issues of all kinds. Having recently adopted, for the first time, a written constitution, complete with a Charter of Rights, Canadians are

discovering that the courts may have more and more to say about what social policies and practices will be acceptable. It is much too soon in the process to say anything about its results, but court decisions will be of increasing moment in many social policy fields.

4. There appears to be declining faith in governments as being able to solve major social problems. Whereas in the 1960's in North America there seemed a general conviction that government action could reduce poverty, improve education, reduce crime, and so on, the last two decades have taught us that such consequences do not follow automatically, if at all, from programs which may be very expensive to mount. To some extent, no doubt, the rise of neo-conservatism is due to public disaffection with the results of state intervention in various spheres of social policy. There may now be some sense that free-market approaches do not work perfectly either. Nonetheless, most people have a healthy scepticism about our ability to deal with major social issues through government programs.

5. Resources are limited. This is hardly news, especially in a country such as Israel, where budgetary problems make ours in Canada pale in comparison. Nonetheless, the consequences of the increasing gap between desired expenditure levels and available revenue, a gap facing governments everywhere, are not yet fully accepted or understood. Most institutions dependent on government revenues have tended to treat the problems of funding either as a temporary condition, soon to disappear, or as something to be overcome through better lobbying and changes in government priorities.

The kinds of changes in institutional thinking and functioning which will eventually be required to cope with the new fiscal realities are only now beginning to be understood in Canada. The requirements for change for government discussed

subsequently in this paper are also applicable to many large organizations. Most important is the conviction that we are indeed in a new era of public sector management, in which past ways of doing things will, in many cases, no longer work.

6. There is increasing interdependence in the policy system as a whole. Within any state, the increasing amount of government legislation, policy, and programmatic activity means that any action in one area touches off consequences in many other areas. For example, education can be affected massively by changes in labour legislation, or in taxation. The development of new industries can create major requirements for additional training or retraining. And, as is well known, changes in economic policy can have massive effects on the demand for social services as jobs disappear, family stresses appear, and so on.

This interdependence of action across functional areas creates many difficulties for governments. Increasingly, the key policy questions facing governments span several, and sometimes most, ministries. Yet few governments have well developed systems for resolving interdepartmental issues. In a parliamentary system, where the ultimate responsibility resides with ministers who have a limited portfolio, interdepartmental action can happen only through two means. Either there is a requirement for officials to agree, which may come, if the parties can set aside their own departmental interests, only after protracted negotiations, or issues must be referred to the entire cabinet (or some subset) for decision. The lack of a bureaucratic support process means that cabinets tend to deal with the rival recommendations of ministries and ministers rather than with an integrated view of the particular issue. In other words, governments are not well-organized for precisely those issues which tend to be most important.

An additional effect of this policy complexity is to make

implementation much more difficult. A policy change in relation to workplace safety, for instance, may be constrained by provisions in collective agreements, or by other imposed directives in relation to other fields, or by financial difficulties arising from budget controls, or by a myriad of other factors seemingly unrelated to the particular policy.

The six trends identified here are themselves interrelated in the manner just described. Institutional rigidities are less difficult to deal with when money is more available, since they can be bypassed; financial constraint makes them more problematic. Similarly, the effect of a more aggressive brand of politics is exacerbated by institutional rigidities and by limited finances, as well as being fed by declining faith in governments to solve problems. A cross-impact analysis of the six trends would show that they had important effects on each other, most of which rendered policy-making and implementation more difficult and contentious.

Requirements for change

What shape would government take were it to make a real effort to adjust to the sorts of trends described above? Without going into great detail, some dimension are relatively self-evident.

There is an immense need for greater flexibility in the use of resources. This implies fewer specialists and more generalists, as well as more transfer of resources (and therefore the processes to facilitate such transfer) from one area of government to another to meet emerging needs. This requirement, of course, exists not only for government itself, but for the key services which it funds, including health and education.

Secondly, there is a critical need for a more integrated approach to policy development. The interdependence of policies

noted above could mean that integrated policies, carefully developed, might address a number of issues with one set of staff and resources. There could be room for considerable improvement in efficiency in this way. The oft-cited notion of integrating health and social services is one example (and one which also illustrates how hard such changes can be to make). A second instance would be improved portability across educational levels and institutions, so that students would not have to fulfill requirements which were not relevant to their plans or skills.

Third, a much better integration of political and programmatic agendas is required. The notion that politics is an activity having little to do with what actually happens in the field is a highly dysfunctional one. It prevents the political and administrative spheres from intersecting smoothly. For example, governments may set up redundant new programs because staff cannot repackage existing activities to meet political needs. To the extent that political agendas can be accommodated through relatively minor adjustments in existing programs (which implies, of course, considerable flexibility in programs), much could be gained at modest cost.

Are these sorts of changes occurring? It would appear that if they are it is primarily through force of circumstance rather than through deliberate action. For there are significant barriers within existing systems and processes preventing the kinds of changes noted.

Barriers to change

Government is ill-prepared generally to adapt to changing conditions. By and large, the forces just described are in direct contradiction to internal dynamics in government-dyanmics which are both political and bureaucratic.

For one thing, government is used to, and depends on, doing more all the time. Politicians are elected, and maintained in office, for doing things. Thus, despite all the rhetoric about budget deficits in most industrialized countries, the reality is that additional spending for new purposes is far more attractive than cutting spending to reduce deficits. The rise of constituency and interest politics simply strengthens this tendency; stronger interest and issue groups raise the price for any government which threatens them.

Within the bureaucracy there is also a dynamic of increase. Such critical matters as pay and status, for example, are typically tied to the size of the operation. Thus managers may be personally penalized for introducing measures which would allow greater efficiency, or which would act to save resources. There are, as many commentators have noted, basically no rewards within the system for getting smaller and leaner. The Canadian federal government has recently introduced some elements of merit pay for senior managers in an effort to address this problem.

At the operating level, too, the dynamic is one of growth without real change. Staff providing services inevitably see how they could use more people and more resources to do a better job using basically the same methods. There is no reason, and indeed, little opportunity, for them to think about how the same results could be obtained with different means and less effort, let alone whether the results are worthwhile in the first place. Thus, in the schools, there is constant pressure for more teachers to reduce the class size, and almost no attention to what sorts of changes in teaching and in program delivery might be available which would allow fewer teachers to teach the same number of pupils without a loss in achievement, even though the latter question is clearly much more in accord with the demands of our times. Hospitals are clearly afflicted by the same tendency to call for more staff and equipment, often to treat

very small numbers of patients in high-profile but expensive areas such as organ transplants.

In addition, the constant pressure on government to avoid mistakes rather than to do the right thing has pernicious effects on adjustment of the system. Especially in parliamentary systems, where an alert opposition is always looking for opportunities to embarass the government, and not necessarily to debate substantive policy issues, there is an immense transfer of energy within the system from debating the issues towards avoiding mistakes of detail. The amount of attention given to the long run impact of policies is minute compared to the attention given to matters of immediate, but fleeting, political import.

There are other elements and dynamics in most governments which work against longer run adjustment of governments to changing conditions as well. Politics is a short term, high pressure business. Ministers are usually under tremendous pressure, and are having to deal simultaneously with a large number of issues, many of which are immensely complex, as well as managing the political element of their work and their personal lives. Politicians tend to be distrustful of the bureaucracies they head. Some distrust is healthy, and, indeed, necessary if politicians are to discharge their mandates. At the same time, politicians tend to ignore the need to pay attention to the machinery of government as well as its substance; to how thing come before them as well as what comes before them.

Furthermore, political considerations make it very difficult for governments to introduce some of the measures which might enhance public sector effectiveness. Raising the salaries of senior managers is politically contentious, and spending money on the development of skills of officials, while given great lip-service on all sides, is rarely done. Since politicians are

amateurs as managers, they often feel their staff should also be amateurs. In Canada, for example, almost all governments have slashed spending on staff development at the very same time as mobility is declining, meaning they will have to live longer with the same people and the same skills (or lack of them).

The bureaucracy, too, finds significant change very difficult. Bureaucracy lives on rules and procedures. In very few government settings is there any sort of climate of innovation. We have already noted that there tend to be no rewards for efficiency, but there can be many penalties for making a mistake. Without sustained attention to the way in which bureaucracies operate - an attention which is unlikely to come from inside - bureaucracies will continue to do what they have always done, while complaining that they do not have the resources to do it properly.

Finally, it should be noted that neither the political nor the bureaucratic environment is an intellectual or analytic one. Both are oriented towards problem-solving, almost always in the short term. This means that there are, typically, few people thinking about the kinds of issues described in this paper. While the orientation of governments is understandable, major environmental change implies major system change, and the latter will not happen by itself.

Attempts at solutions

Of course, governments have made attempts to come to terms with changing conditions. However, by and large these attempts are based on a superficial analysis of circumstances, and are ad-hoc in nature.

One strategy frequently adopted is greater central control. Where governments find themselves with an agenda which is

becoming unmanageable, the normal reaction is to seek to centralize decision-making and have more issues determined at higher levels, so as to avoid mistakes. Centralization is seen as a means of dealing with an unskilled or uncooperative bureaucracy.

A second tactic used by governments has been to squeeze budgets by requiring units to take on additional tasks or expenses without providing additional resources. This approach reflects a belief that there is inefficiency in the system, and that squeezing departments or ministries will force them to make changes which they would never propose on their own.

Other examples could be cited, but have in common with those noted above that they represent a short-term strategy. Each has some value; such approaches do work in a limited way. But they suffer from serious defects as well. Various strategies can be mutually contradictory. In the case of the two examples above, the imposition of greater centralization contradicts the decentralized, "solve it yourself" bias of the second policy. Thus, even where line managers can come up with ways to meet newly imposed requirements, they may be prevented from acting by highly centralized decision-making processes.

The conditions around government social policy are changing dramatically. Government operations and practices will also have to shift substantially to meet those changes, but that there is little evidence of this entire problem being addressed in any systematic way.

Of course, it is easy to criticize the shortcomings in government practice. Remedying them is a much more difficult undertaking, for there are no easy solutions. One cannot begin anew. History, practice, tradition, current organizational modes, and, most of all, set ways of thinking have an immense

influence on what reforms are possible.

Thus, frequent calls for greater rationality in government processes miss the point that government operates on what Lindblom and Cohen term an "interactive", rather than a "cogitative" rationality. That is, decisions tend to be the result of debate and interaction rather than only of thinking. The often-made call for better priority setting, and "making the tough decisions" usually means that someone else's desires should be ignored in favour of one's own. (Governments do set priorities, even if those priorities become to treat everything in as similar a fashion as possible.) Twenty years of experience with appealing-looking systems such as PERT, MBO, ZBB, and a host of others have demonstrated that no system can encompass the range of human ingenuity in working around the rules to produce desired outcomes. Despite what many analysts say, politics are highly rational; they differ from analytical approaches in the assumptions on which the operative rationality is based.

Prospects

What seems likely to occur, then, over the next few years, based on the above analysis?

The first guess is that there will be continued, and probably increasing, trouble in governments. Because change is going to happen one way or another, and most likely through a process of trial and error, we can expect to see plenty of errors, both in process and in substance. Everybody will be trying to figure out new rules of the game without, in most cases, taking the time to think through the nature of the game in the first place. This is a recipe for confusion and disarray, and we are likely to see a great deal of these. Of course, one result is likely to be increased public frustration with government, and therefore even greater pressure for change.

A second likely outcome is that there will be increased innovation in the way governments conduct their business. Whether planned or not, new forms and approaches are going to emerge. People will try new things, some of which will work. Those which work may, to use a biological metaphor, have a better chance of surviving and, indeed, of spreading. An example in my own situation is the increasing willingness of the government to grant greater operating flexibility in return for increased revenues. There is debate about whether this is a good thing to do, but the fiscal requirements are so urgent that it is simply necessary, and is occurring. Thus a necessary process of decentralization is occurring in this instance, even if for the wrong reasons. No doubt similar developments are occurring in other jurisdictions based on a similar necessity.

The question is whether trouble or innovation will win out. And here there would seem to be some grounds for optimism.

For one thing, some problems solve themselves. There is a story about the Hindu god Shiva, who noticed one day that a loyal follower was in trouble. Saddling his chariot, the god rode off to the rescue, only to return moments later because, as he explained, "By the time I got there he had helped himself". It is possible that some of the problems which we now take to be very serious will largely disappear of their own accord, as appears to be happening, for example, with youth unemployment because of the shrinking size of the youth cohort in many countries.

Secondly, government itself is, internally, a largely anarchical undertaking. Under the shell of procedures and bureacracy there is a ferment of ideas, proposals, strategies, and ventures under way at any point. Moreover, the corollary of the short-term political orientation is that change can happen

very quickly when the circumstances are right; far more rapidly than would be the case in a self-governing bureaucratic setting.

Finally, open democratic societies are characterized by great resilience and tremendous adaptability, albeit on many occasions an adaptability which is dearly purchased. Winston Churchill is reputed to have called democracy "the worst form of government ever devised - except for all the others", and that remains a good description.

There are, therefore, at least some reasons to think that significant improvement will occur, and that governments will be able to adjust to the major changes in circumstance that surround them. It would be nice to conclude this paper with three or four straightforward suggestions. If there were such ideas, however, they would certainly have been advocated and adopted. Much more likely is a kind of muddling through, in which experiment, trial and error, and flashes of intuition will be as important as anything else.